

HOT ROD (The Eliminator)

I understand that the Eliminator is now the property of Brock Yates.

Old and tricky Turn One at Santa Barbara used to have an entrance as wide as five sportscars, but its precarious exit was so narrow it barely accommodated two. Immovable telephone poles served as inside and outside boundaries. So, half a century ago, the annual mystery of the Memorial Day and Labor Day Weekend matches was how the Eliminator, a tall, broad-beamed, *echte* Los Angeles hot rod, managed to lumber and hyperventilate in and out of One among all the sportscars without ever molesting them or the phone poles.

The crimson-and-white Eliminator, named after its fiery Isky camshaft, had classic 1926 T Ford coachwork which came dangerously close to having a career on one of L.A.'s dirt track hot rods – a brutal career which surely would have destroyed it, just like all dirt track 'rods got destroyed. But the owner of the coachwork changed his mind and sold it to happy-go-lucky Duffy Livingston, proprietor of a modest but hip muffler shop out in the San Gabriel Valley. Sportscar racing was flourishing. A witty and funny man, a real out-of-step kind of guy, Duffy decided to construct the Eliminator and go sporty at roughly the same time that Max Balchowsky, another iconoclast, was invading the same sportscar ranks with his outrageous Ol' Yellers.

Fleshing things out, Duffy observed the hot rodder convention by appropriating a front axle from a '37 Ford. Other, more original, choices included a Halibrand center section axle mated to an old dirt-tracking Cook rear end; full belly pans and torsion bars; and laying in a full-race 3/8 x 3/8 flathead Mercury. But the package never ran or handled properly, so, sometime in 1956, Duffy paid a fast \$20 for an Eddie Cole Chevy V8 with one scorched cylinder head. He carried out the repairs himself.

The Eliminator, with its kick-ass Isky cam, and Spalding flame-thrower electronics, promptly turned into a monster.

With Livingston and a gas tank half-tank of high-test, the Eliminator weighed barely 150 pounds better than a ton. Yet looked far more ponderous. Duffy sought the counsel of Frank Kurtis, still dean of the Indianapolis 500 roadster, to achieve a semblance of balance. Kurtis willingly shared his oval-track trick of distributing 47 percent of the tonnage to the rear.

How potent was Duffy's Eliminator? It's difficult to say, because its identity got confused. Duffy and the Eliminator's legions of supporters considered it a hot rod, and wanted it to race with the sportscars, but the Sports Car Club of America, and the California Sports Car Club, the two sanctioning body foes, who both were repelled by the Eliminator, voted the Eliminator a disturbing hybrid best banished with the rest of the oddball iron to the open-wheel Free Formula category.

Free Formula was a weird and wonderful grab-bag class. It bristled with everything from torpedo Formula 3 Coopers, with Norton Manx motorcycle mills, to a glorious antique Formula 1 Lago Talbot raced to the limit by Terry Hall, once a professional ice skater. Terry's Lago and Duffy's Eliminator became best friends/enemies in this unruly division.

During the late 1950s, the two sanctioning clubs loosened the reins and permitted Duffy to add fenders and the Eliminator entered combat against authentic sportscars at last. It never

won a main event. On the other hand, Duffy today maintains that no import ever forced him to capitulate in a corner. And contrary to false history that has come down, and its monster looks aside, the Eliminator could navigate corners without getting dirt-tracked; it was easy to control.

Livingston's own overdue recognition of how fine an automobile he had underneath him occurred at the Los Angeles County Fairgrounds, in the huge and infamous *Examiner* Grand Prix. Everybody in the world was there, and Duffy didn't expect to have a chance.

Yet the Eliminator out-qualified half the professional field, including seven Ferraris, four Maseratis, two Porches, four Coopers, and Wolfgang von Trips and Maurice Trintignant from Europe; Indy 500 studs such as Tony Bettenhausen and Jim Rathmann; plus many of the celebrated sportscar lions Jim Hall, Bruce Kessler and the great Bobby Drake, as out of step as Duffy.

Late in the Grand Prix, after just overtaking the Ferrari 4.9 which ultimately finished third, the Eliminator overheated, suffering Duffy a lengthy cooling-off pit stop. He still finished fifth in his engine class, earning \$600, a stunning amount of prize money for the times.

Duffy left sportscars and the lumbering Eliminator to become, of all unusual occupations for somebody who once sat on top of a ton of hot rod, one of the inventors and celebrants of the weightless go-kart!

All the pioneer karters were hard racers but also sunny men – easy-come-easy go, famous for their senses of humor. Mickey Rupp off the Florida Gold Coast, fond friend of Duffy, was a fantastic platform-on-wheels gun with his own Dart Karts and Dart mini-bikes, who, following a rousing rookie Indianapolis 500, was tooling out of the Speedway on one of his mini-bikes when struck down by a motorist who hadn't been looking.

"I just raced 500 miles without a scratch and look what you did to me!" Mickey complained to the motorist.

And, one year at Santa Barbara, when Duffy and the Eliminator were in the middle of another claustrophobic passage across diminishing-radius Turn One, a silver Ferrari, all costly delicate aluminum, arrived from nowhere to spear the Eliminator straight in the passenger door.

A big crowd in the pits next observed Duffy – ever happy-go-lucky -- wailing a huge rubber-tipped hammer, affecting emergency bodywork repairs. A roar of laughter went up when he explained, in effect:

It was no great deal to wrinkle up a Ferrari and then go buy a fresh one, any idiot could do that, but, dammit, these '26 T Ford doors were becoming hard to come by! (1993)

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